

Re-imagining the National Museum of Singapore's Role in a Post- pandemic World

Chung May Khuen

Director
National Museum of Singapore

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unusual challenge to Singapore's oldest museum—for the first time in its history, it had to shutter its doors due to a global health crisis. While the museum had already been making forages into the digital realm prior, the crisis propelled its team to embrace the medium and leverage it to expand its offerings and increase its audience outreach. In this essay, the director shares the museum's journey in pivoting to the digital.

The National Museum marked its 134th birthday in October 2021. As the oldest museum in Singapore, it has weathered several difficult situations over the last century. We remained opened throughout the Japanese Occupation (1942-1945) and came out of World War Two unscathed except for a few shell hits. In 1972, we forged a new identity in telling the story of nation-building after we transferred one of our most prized collections—the natural history collection—to the National Museum of Malaysia and the University of Singapore (present-day National University of Singapore). In 2003, we closed the museum, moved into an inaccessible shopping mall and risked being forgotten by our audiences when we embarked on a three-year major re-development project. This article looks at how a global health crisis, in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic, has affected the museum since 2020, and how we have been steering a new and sustainable course for ourselves as we continue to fight the pandemic.

Circuit Breaker and the initial crisis

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been described as the defining crisis of a generation in Singapore. It has deeply impacted all aspects of our lives over the last two years. In recent months, we have been told by Singapore's multi-ministry task force tackling the pandemic that the coronavirus was never going to go away and Singapore must learn to live with it as it becomes an endemic.

When Singapore underwent the Circuit Breaker, a period of enhanced safety measures to reduce transmission of COVID-19 from April to May in 2020, the museum had to close its doors, like most of the other “non-essential” services. This is rather unusual in the history of the museum. Except for a few closures due to major renovations to the galleries and the building over the last few decades, the museum had always remained open, even during the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003.

The first two months of the museum's closure during Circuit Breaker was challenging. I had just taken over the role as the director at the end of 2019, when the museum had just welcomed a new record number of a million visitors. Today, even though we are open, we continue to operate at a limited capacity and are constantly tweaking our offerings, toggling between onsite and online programmes because of the changing safe management measures. The majority of our visitors are Singaporeans and residents in Singapore as international travel has not resumed.



Figure 1. A deserted museum on the eve of the Circuit Breaker, April 2020.
Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

During Circuit Breaker, except for a handful of estate staff who had to be on site to maintain the building, the rest of us worked from home. As we struggled with the unfamiliarity of holding virtual meetings, many of us also took the opportunity to keep ourselves abreast of how the role and fate of museums were changing around the world in these challenging times by attending webinars and podcasts. I recall experiencing an initial fear of running an empty museum of dusty galleries because of the prolonged lockdown. But this anxiety was soon replaced by a preoccupation with how we could engage our visitors digitally.

Pivoting to digital

The museum pivoted towards the digital very early on although it was unplanned. Our first online virtual offering was that of our special exhibition commemorating Singapore's

bicentennial, *An Old New World: From the East Indies to the Founding of Singapore 1600-1819*, which had just ended its run at the museum in March 2020. Conceived before the onset of the pandemic, the digital experience included a 360 degrees virtual tour of the exhibition along with special curator-led tours. Within a month of its launch, it had clocked 20,000 online viewers.

In the absence of physical visitors who traditionally have been the management's most important performance indicator before the lockdown, reaching out to a digital audience has now become our focus. Encouraged by the huge appetite for online content during Circuit Breaker, the team comprising curators, programmers, exhibitions and collections managers, and marketing managers came together and began to put up a calendar of digital programmes that cater to different groups of audience. Except for one staff who looks after digital content on our social media, the rest of the team had neither prior experience nor the technical expertise.

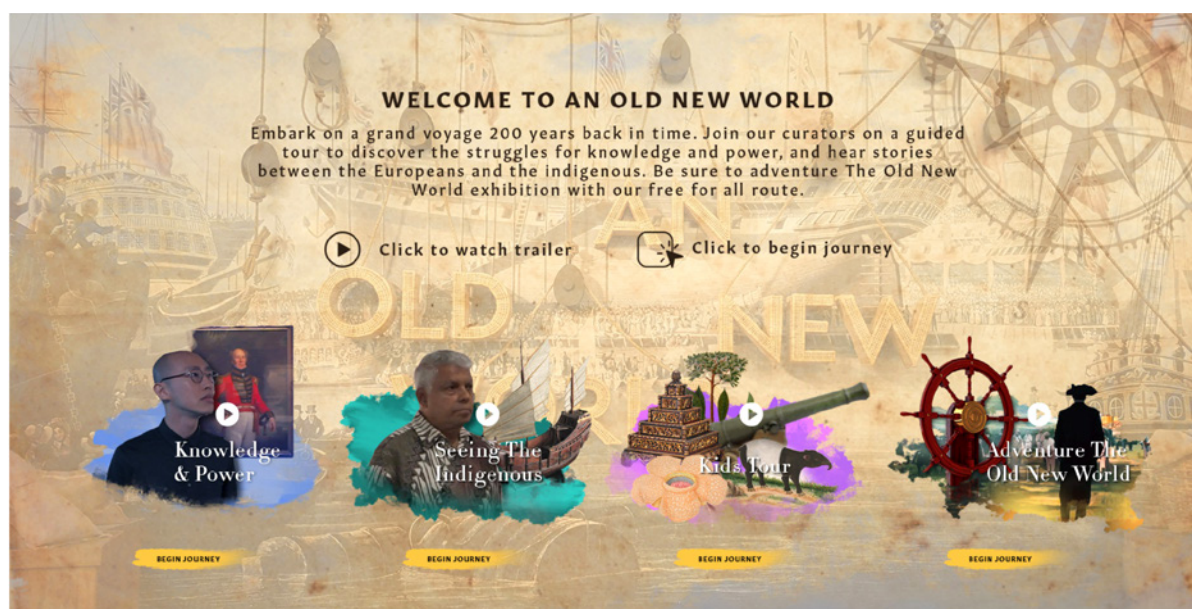


Figure 2. Home page of *An Old New World: Digital Edition*—a 360-degree digital showcase of our bicentennial exhibition physical offering, April 2020. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Changing expectations of our digital audience

Very soon, the team began to realise that people were not only suffering from digital fatigue but also had new expectations of the programmes offered online. For example, one of the most common requests from our audience is to make our events more interactive. As such, after the initial months of pre-recorded events, the team started to experiment with live-streaming and incorporated an interactive segment which allowed participants to ask the host questions and had them responding during the event.

In most instances, online programmes have provided us with the ability to reach out to a wider audience in terms of quantity regardless

of geographical locations. But in some cases, we deliberately capped the number of participants in the programme. For example, our programmes for seniors with dementia had only eight participants each time. The size of the event allowed our volunteers to engage each senior individually in conversation and helped spark their memories as they were brought on a gallery tour via Zoom. In some instances, robots were also used to facilitate such virtual tours.

Since the start of the pandemic, the rapid pivot towards digital has certainly allowed us to stay engaged with our audiences from home. However, we are also aware that we need to be nimble and creative in packaging our programmes, depending on who the audience is. As we had learnt over the last two years, there is “no one size fits all” programme. The team also recognises that hybrid programmes are here to stay and that they will have to manage both digital and on-site programmes.



Figure 3. During the Singapore Heritage Festival in 2021, we organised a livestream of a cooking demonstration where audiences at home could “chat” with Chef Bob. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

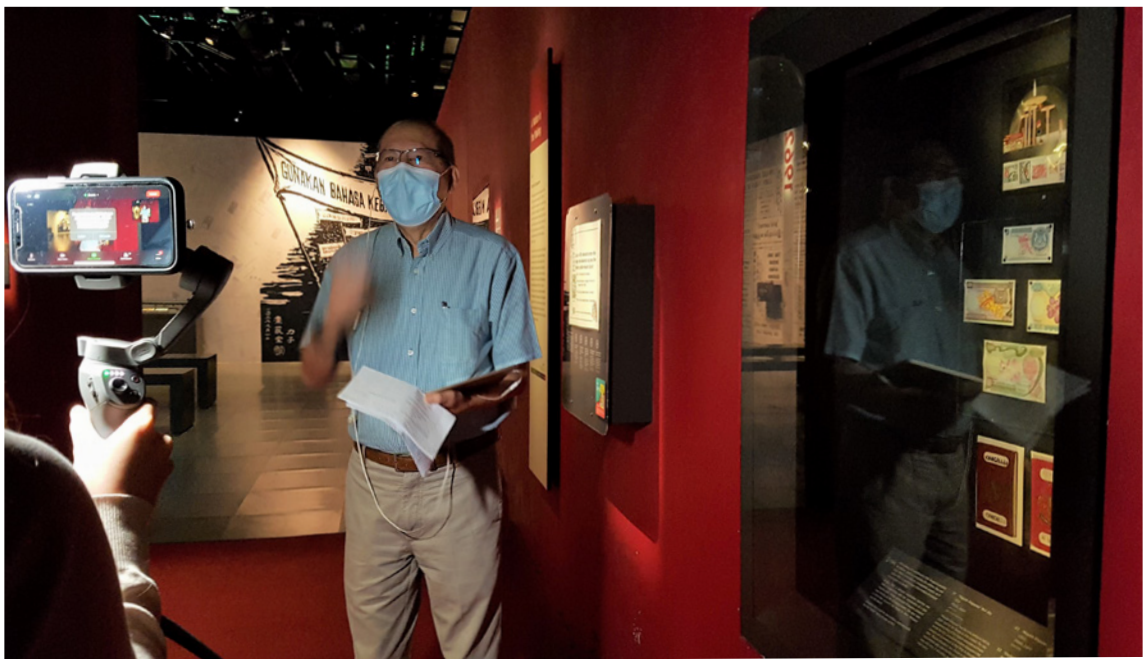


Figure 4. One of our Care Facilitators bringing a group of seniors to the Singapore History gallery at the Museum via Zoom platform. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 5. Hybrid offering of the lion dance performance held during Chinese New Year 2021. It attracted 32 visitors on site and another 3,000 online viewers over a week. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Hence, it is pertinent that we explore different ways of producing events that require less production time with the same number of staff in the team. We have also started to integrate digital experiences into every aspect of the work we do, something which was quite unthinkable in the past. By doing this, we hope to minimise the disruptions to our work, reduce the mental stress faced by staff whenever there is a change in safety guidelines, and without compromising on the delivery of these experiences to our visitors.

Our new role in society

The disruption caused by the pandemic has served as a catalyst for us to re-think our place in a post-pandemic world, especially in terms of our collecting strategy. In recent years, the museum has seen an increased importance in collecting stories, images, and objects of significant contemporary events as they unfold. For example, in 2003, during the outbreak of SARS, the museum sent five photographers to document the outbreak at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, then the designated hospital in Singapore for the treatment of all suspected and confirmed SARS cases. The photographs were

exhibited at the museum a year later. A catalogue was released as well.

Similarly, during the Circuit Breaker, the museum commissioned five local photographers—Bob Lee, Brian Teo, Edwin Koo, How Hwee Young, and Zakaria Zainal—and two filmmakers—Adar Ng and Dave Lim—to document the range of experiences of everyday life during this period. In addition, we also launched a concerted effort to collect stories and objects related to the pandemic in May 2020 with an open call. This comprehensive rapid response to collect for an important current event is unprecedented for the museum. This is following the valuable lesson we learnt from collecting for SARS several years ago, where collecting objects occurred only a few years after the outbreak, with very little success. The almost immediate response to collecting for COVID-19 serves as a reminder to us that while the collecting of historical objects relevant to Singapore history is important to our role as the National Museum of Singapore, it is also equally important to collect the contemporary. This marked the start of the museum's new initiative that has come to be known as *Collecting Contemporary Singapore*.



Figure 6. A thermometer and a notebook used to record temperature readings during the SARS period. These were collected by the museum five years after the outbreak. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 7. A display of objects related to COVID-19 pandemic contributed by the public at the *Picturing the Pandemic* exhibition. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 8. The museum also asked for staff to contribute objects which they felt would be important to collecting the COVID-19. This display served as a conversation corner for our visitors. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

At the end of February 2021, the museum opened the *Picturing the Pandemic: A Visual Record of COVID-19 in Singapore* exhibition, to put forward our message to the public that we are collecting contemporary memories. The exhibition showcases what life was like during and immediately after the Circuit Breaker, and includes the photographs and films we have commissioned, as well as the objects we have collected as part of the open call launched in May 2020.

The exhibition, which was not planned for, was put up in four months by the entire curatorial team. Driven by the poignant and meaningful collection of stories, artefacts, and images we had amassed by October 2020, the museum realised that we could play a part in the fight against the pandemic by putting up an exhibition that shows our appreciation for the bravery, selflessness, and dedication of our frontline workers, as well as remind ourselves that we could and would overcome the pandemic if we remain determined and resilient together.



Figure 9. The first section of the *Picturing the Pandemic* exhibition looks at the life of a nurse, a child, and a para-athlete during Circuit Breaker. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.



Figure 10 and 11. Visitors were encouraged to visit our permanent galleries to learn more about the gadgets of the past and compare them to Doraemon's gadgets (left); Visitors taking images with Doraemon at the outdoor installation (right). Images courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

It was also during the same time that the museum began to assert its new identity as a social space that offers solace and uplifting experiences that connect visitors to their roots and to one another. From 31 October to 27 December 2020, we took a calculated risk and launched an installation campaign called *Doraemon: Time Travelling Adventures* in Singapore while we were in Phase 2, a period of heightened alert, of the pandemic.

The campaign was based on the popular classic Japanese manga character Doraemon, who is a well-loved character with Singaporeans from the 1980s to 1990s. Both online and onsite visitors were encouraged to explore the stories of Singapore through our permanent galleries and collections with Doraemon. Originally slated to

open during the school holidays in May 2020, we decided to postpone and reduce the number of physical installations instead of cancelling the campaign. At the same time, we scaled up the digital content with trails and activities. The campaign, to our surprise, saw an increase of 82% in visitorship as compared to the same period in 2019. While we attribute the huge numbers largely to the fact that Singaporeans and residents in Singapore were still unable to travel, we were also encouraged that there were 32.2% more first-time visitors than before. It made us realise that the campaign's approach of telling stories about Singapore's history and artefacts in a fun and accessible way had helped us attract new first-time visitors.



Figure 12. As part of National Day Celebrations 2021, the museum curated a special façade light up of the building which ran from 7pm to 12am midnight throughout August. The installation was one of the many ways in which we hope to bring cheer to our visitors during this difficult time. We also invited Singaporean artist Francis Ng to install his artwork *Was I Here?*, based on a threefold social movement which invites people to examine the ideas of presence, identity, and place, with the hope for the healing and joy that art can bring to society. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

Conclusion

These past two years have been unpredictable and even difficult for us at the museum. However, the period has also given us the opportunity to rethink our role and relevance in a new normal on several fronts. The lack of physical audiences due to the ever-changing safe management measures made us pivot from initially presenting only digital programmes, to having hybrid offerings at the museum now. In the long run, we hope to continue to explore creative ways of delivering our content both online and onsite and see them complementing each other rather than existing as just a stand-alone or ad-hoc experience. To do that, the museum hopes to establish our first digital framework and strategy by 2022 that will guide all aspects of the work we do. In addition, we will continue to up-skill ourselves and work with the

right partners to present our stories and collections in immersive, interactive, and fun ways.

Earlier, I had mentioned the fear of the demise of a physical museum because of the impact of the pandemic. But we have demonstrated how we can overcome this by sharpening our relevance in society. The positive response we have received from the public in collecting for COVID-19, the *Picturing the Pandemic* exhibition, and the Doraemon installation campaign are just some examples which remind us that the museum can have a sustainable role in society by extending its traditional role to a social one that brings people together and inspires hope in the most extreme times. As the oldest museum in Singapore, we have constantly adapted with the changing times. Today, these same characteristics—unwavering resolve and ability to evolve—have helped us in our fight against the pandemic, and chart new territories for the museum. □

About the Author



Chung May Khuen is Director of the National Museum of Singapore (NMS). She began her career as an Assistant Curator at the Asian Civilisations Museum in 1997 before joining NMS in 2003. Through her career, she has led the curation of notable exhibitions such as *In the Mood for Cheongsam* (2012) and *White Wedding Dress*, an international exhibition from London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and the revamp of permanent galleries in NMS. She was posted to the Heritage Conservation Centre as Deputy from 2016 to June 2019, before rejoining NMS and being appointed as director later that year. Chung received her MA in History and Culture of Fashion from the London College of Fashion (UK) in 2009, under a full scholarship from the National Heritage Board.